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VIVI CONWAY

AND THE
LOST HERO

Lizzie Huxley-Jones

KO
KNIGHTS OF

For Eishar & Abi, who made my dream come true.

Chapter One

Dara

It's been almost two months since we lost Vivi.

No. Since they took her.

There's been no sign of her. At all.

It's like she's been wiped out of existence. Like we dreamed her up.

She was stolen from us on Halloween. And now it's almost Christmas. It doesn't really get proper snowy here like it does in Scotland, but a chill has set in and the pavements are icy with frost.

When I breathe out as I walk, a cloud of hot misty air hangs in front of me. It really is winter.

Time keeps on going, without her. I don't understand how I'm supposed to wake up every day and accept that she's gone?

I know that we need to keep looking for her, but I don't know how to do that. How are you supposed to move forward when the person you're trying to find is missing *because* of you?

I'm not sure I've ever felt really guilty before this. Embarrassed and ashamed probably – I always felt bad when I kept Mum distracted from her work because I really just wanted to hang out with her. But guilt? That's a new feeling. It's sour and hot and sits in my stomach like a bad dinner I can never digest.

I don't think that'll ever go away.

Not unless we find her.

It doesn't help that Gelert has been missing since Vivi was taken. Not that I was really *aware* of what was going on when we packed up to leave; everything was such a blur. I was checked out, completely. Which makes me feel more guilty because the others were trying to rally us, make a plan of how they were going to find her, and all I could do was stare at the waves and wish something would happen.

All I know is that Gelert hasn't shown up at my house since then. My dog Callie is probably relieved; him being around, even when he's not visible to her, always freaks her out a bit. She ends up barking at walls or sniffing

very intently in corners. Rabbie sometimes jokes she's seen a ghost, which is ironically right for once.

I don't think the others have seen him either.

Not that I've really been talking to them that much. There's that guilt again, but I'm just worried about what they're thinking. At school it's easy to focus on your work and ignore everyone – that's what Vivi tried to do when she first came here, I think, but I was too persistent with her.

The last time we hung out was Stevie's birthday when, well, I didn't exactly hang around long. I know when I'm ruining the vibe, and I was *really* ruining the vibe.

But they're coming over today, so I should probably try and buck up a little bit. Merry sent me a message yesterday, just as school was ending, asking us all to video call her the next morning. Even though we could do a group video call from our individual homes, Stevie insisted she and Chia come over to mine to do it. They know I can't avoid them in my own house.

I really should clean up before they come over, especially because my room looks like our fake play folder exploded *everywhere*.

But, as it's Saturday morning, I've got somewhere else to be first.

I knock on the door, and it swings open quickly to reveal a woman with a cloud of blonde hair that bounces excitedly.

“Dara! Lovely to see you!”

“Hi Mrs. Conway.”

“Do you want to come in for a cuppa? It’s chilly out there.”

I’ve made the mistake of going in before. The bathroom is upstairs, right next to Vivi’s old room. Except the door doesn’t open any more, and the Conways didn’t seem to know what I was talking about when I asked about it. That’s what I mean about Vivi being wiped from existence; there’s nothing left of her here.

“Not today, thank you. I just wanted to drop off some brownies my Pops made. New recipe – pistachios, I think.”

I hand her a plastic takeaway box, so packed with brownies that I had to squash the lid down on them. It doesn’t look the best, but it gets the job done.

“Oh Dara, you sweetheart.” She flings her arms around me and squishes me tight. It makes my stomach ache. It’s the way Vivi liked to be hugged. “You’ve been so good at making us feel welcome here. And it’s always very good to give gifts on the equinox. I hope this brings you the very best luck for the next part of the year.”

She pops open the lid and takes a little bit of brownie. When it touches her tongue, she closes her eyes and sighs happily.

“Your Pops is a wizard in the kitchen. Thank him for me, will you?”

“I will.”

I bite down the swirling feeling I always get when I come here. The guilt. “My pleasure. Say hi to Helen for me?”

“Will do Dara.”

I’m about to reach the gate when she calls me back. I don’t think I have much in me for more conversation today, because there are always these offhand moments where she says something that reminds me of the huge hole in her house that she can’t even see.

“I was thinking of getting some bulbs in the ground next weekend as it’s supposed to be dry enough. Do you want to come help? A little post-Christmas planting to bring in the new year.”

“I’d love that,” I say.

She looks up at the gloomy sunshine above us. “We get more sunlight in the days from tomorrow, so maybe things will be brighter all round? I’ll text your Pops about what day.”

“Okay. See you then!”

As I close the gate behind me, all the tension leaves my body along with a few rogue sparks I have to stamp out on the pavement. Luckily there's no one else around. They bounce off the wet, grey pavement like beads.

Everyone is tucked up inside their houses. I pass glowing lights in the windows, lit trees and televisions playing Christmas movies. I wish I could find the cheery mood that everyone else is feeling.

When I get inside, Mum and Pops are singing in the kitchen as they make sausage rolls. Rabbie is off somewhere, and Lachie is in the living room playing games with his friends. They all know something is off with me, but I can't tell them what it is. After all, none of them remember Vivi either.

They just think I'm being a moody pre-teen.

My room is more of a bombsite than I realised, now having left and come back. There's been a lot of wallowing in here, but also some attempts at thinking too. On my bed are the two treasures I found in my bag when I got back from Enlli— the quill pen and the ink pot. I'm pretty sure Merry gave them to me, in the hope I might find out how they worked. I've just been ignoring them.

Stevie still has the ring and the chainmail we made

for her. Chia has the bridle for Eirlys. Emrys got his cloak and the chessboard back. I think Vivi still has that compass.

Merry kept the rest: she's the child of the magical island after all. And technically the King. Though, we haven't quite worked out what her job title should be yet. I think she's just folded it all into her Ghost Queen duties. I regret leaving behind the infinite cake knife with Merry though because a constant supply of Pops' Sachertorte would be incredible. I did consider asking her to post it, but I think losing a magical artefact to Royal Mail would be too embarrassing to live down.

When I can't sleep from anxiety, I have been trying to work out what the quill pen and ink pot actually do. There's no magical refilling – I learned that the hard way – and no invisible ink, like the kind you can make with lemon juice. Admittedly, I have been basing all my ideas on murder mysteries. Clearly, I'm missing something magical.

But there's been no one to ask. No Ceridwen. No Gelert.

I know there's something I just haven't seen yet. There always is.

I hear the doorbell go downstairs, so I hurriedly try to move stuff out the way and off the bed, but all

I manage to do is create piles of piles. Maybe I can intercept them, and we can go somewhere else. The Wendy house outside will be freezing cold, but they won't have to see my mess.

I'm too slow though, because when I open my bedroom door, Chia and Stevie are right there.

"Hey guys," I say awkwardly. "How are you? How about we—"

As I go to shut the door, Stevie sticks out her long leg, thunking her foot against it so I can't close or even move it.

"Don't kick my door please."

"I didn't kick it," Stevie says plainly.

"You literally just did."

Chia rolls her eyes. "Guys, *please*. I already have a headache. Just let us in Dara."

"I errr... Can we go—"

Chia spins the phone in her hand round to reveal Merry on video call. I'm pretty sure it's actually Stevie's phone, the one her parents gave her recently to make up for always being away for work, but Chia is apparently in charge of carrying it (and Merry) around today. Her small but serious face fills up the entire screen on our end. "This is an intervention, Dara."

“A what? Why?”

“We’ll talk more inside,” Chia says. “Come on.”

Stevie’s nostrils flare with impatience. “Just let us in.”
It’s not a question. It’s never a question.

“Dara, stop being weird to your friends!” Pops calls as he walks upstairs. “Do you want to stay for lunch? I’ve got a vat of chilli on the go.”

“That would be lovely, thank you,” says Chia politely.
Stevie just nods. She gets a bit nervous around my parents.

“Ah is that wee Meredith on the phone?”

“I’m older than all of them, how am I wee?” I hear her mutter through the phone’s tinny speakers.

Pops takes the phone from Chia, holding it too close to his face as usual. I can only imagine the view poor Merry is getting on her end, all nostril hair and teeth. “I’ll be expecting you won’t be eating with us, but we can prop you up in front of a bowl if you’d like?”

“I’ve got my own breakfast to attend to, thank you Uncle Bruce. I’m on a different schedule to you guys.”

“Alright, well I’ll leave you four to have fun. I hope we get to see this play of yours one day!”

I groan as we close the door behind us. “I really hoped he’d forgotten about the play.”

“We told him it was a theatrical intervention,” Merry explains.

“Great. My cast is revolting on me.”

“Well, at least you were telling the truth about needing to clean in here,” murmurs Stevie, as she shuffles the treasures and my talisman and some inventions along the duvet.

“Can you not?” I groan, shoving papers into a pile that I’m going to have to sort through later because they are definitely not in order.

Chia sets Meredith-on-the-phone down on my bedside table and sits down next to it. There’s only a tiny bit of space left, but she pats it for me to sit down too.

There’s too much anxiety racing through my body for me to sit still without me shooting sparks everywhere, never mind this close to either of them, so I stay standing. There’s not really enough room to pace, so I just jiggle on the spot. “So. You said it’s an intervention?”

They all glance nervously at each other, which is quite impressive given Merry isn’t even in the room with us.

“We saw you going to Vivi’s,” says Chia eventually.

Well. Cat’s out of the bag there then. Thing is, I’d not told any of them that I was visiting the Conways,

and my parents hadn't mentioned it in front of them because, why would they? To them, Abigail and Helen are just two new neighbours on our street. Why would they think Stevie or Chia would know them?

The not-quite-lie but purposefully-unmentioned-truth had somewhat added to my guilt situation though.

I decide to play it off casually. "Yes, I went to see Abigail and give her some of Pops' brownies. It's not a weird thing to do."

I hate that Chia gives me such a sad look. "Oh Dara," she sighs.

"It is a bit weird, Dara." Stevie taps me with her socked foot.

"Can you stop kicking things, especially me?"

"Tell us why you've been going to the Conways then."

"They're my neighbours. You do nice things like that for your neighbours."

Their silence is deafening. After all, it's not normal when you're directly responsible for the mysterious vanishing of their kid that they forgot they even have.

"This is worse than I thought," Merry mutters.

"It's not that weird," I protest weakly.

Stevie rolls her eyes. "If that was true, you'd have told us about it. Not hidden it from us for... why exactly?"

I flump down onto the floor, covering my eyes so I don't have to look at any of them. "I didn't mean to keep it a secret."

"That was the first new rule we agreed, Dara," sighs Chia. "No secrets."

"Okay but this *is* a first offence right? Vivi was the one keeping all the secrets last year." The words are out before I can think of what I've even said.

"Yeah, and look where that got her," Stevie murmurs. I let out a little moan.

"Plus, you were keeping secrets. The whole trying to sacrifice yourself thing," adds Merry. "That was a secret."

"It was a last-minute decision."

"That's not better!" laughs Stevie in disbelief.

"Hey, come on now," Chia says, her voice sharp. "Blaming each other isn't going to help us move forward."

"How can we move forward when we don't even know where we're going?" I groan. "We don't even know where Vivi is."

"Annwn probably," suggests Merry.

It's Stevie's turn to sigh now. "That's if she's even—"

"She is," I snap, refusing to believe Stevie could even suggest that. "I'd know if she wasn't."

Chia stills me with a hand on my shoulder, snuffing out

a spark that landed on the carpet with a quick flush of air.

"Thanks." I fidget with the burned ends of carpet.
"Should I stop going then?"

Chia's hand is still on my shoulder. "How often were you dropping in?"

My mouth goes dry because I know they're not going to like my answer. "A few times a week? We're planting seeds after Christmas."

I don't even need to look at them to know they're giving me very tired looks. I hate feeling like my friends are running out of patience for me. I need to be better. I need to do better. It's just... so much all of the time. The irony is the person who would understand this most is Vivi.

"I think it would probably raise more questions if you stopped going suddenly," Chia says, and then I feel her take my hands away from covering my eyes. "And I'm sure Vivi will appreciate you checking in on her mums."

"I really am sorry I didn't tell you about it."

"We get it. You've been in a funk," says Stevie, which is one way to put it.

"Is this intervention over?" I ask, a little nervous they're going to say no.

"Ish. While you've been... feeling bad or whatever, we've been working on some things."

“What? Wait, *you’ve* been keeping secrets.”

“It’s not a secret.”

“It kind of is, if I wasn’t involved.”

“I don’t think you’d have listened if we tried to talk to you about it before we had anything,” says Chia, so gently it’s kind of devastating.

She takes a tablet out of her bag, and opens up an image. She zooms out, and out, and that’s when I realise; not only that it’s a map, but what it’s a map *of*. After all, it’s colour-coded for the crystals.

“The Unlands,” I whisper. “That’s the whole Unlands?”

“I don’t think it’s all of it,” says Chia. She swipes the map across and down until we hover over the part that’s over (or next to, or inside?) London. I remember walking down those tunnels. The last time I saw this shape it was on paper.

“How did you do this?”

“Well, these guys sent me it in portions with measurements and I drew it up on the software. I think it’s to scale, but I can’t be sure without going there myself,” Merry explains, which is all very cool but not quite what I meant.

I look at Chia and Stevie. “You’ve been going in this

whole time? Since...”

They nod before I finish the sentence. So I don’t have to, I suppose.

“You didn’t tell me.”

“We didn’t want to add more worry to your plate,” says Chia.

“What if you got in trouble? What if Arawn came after you both? Then what?” Another anxious spark shoots from my hand, landing in my hair. I snuff it out, but the smell of burned hair is gross. We’re all relieved when Chia gusts it away.

“We logged all our trips with Merry,” Stevie says slowly. “She was monitoring activity through her blog, helping us work out where might be quietest for us to head to. We never go alone, or for long. We’ve been using that portal in the park, it’s still open.”

I *want* to be angry, but I’m not. I’m just a whirlwind of sad, and if I’m honest, I feel like they left me behind because of what happened. Because I’m a liability to them.

“Hey,” Chia says, reaching for me. “Wherever you’re going in that head of yours, that’s not it. We weren’t leaving you because we didn’t want you there.”

“They *did* ask you once if you want to hang out,”

Merry chimes in. "But you said you were too sad to go."

"Thanks Merry," I say, a little sarcastically.

"No problem."

A very pathetic spark floats in the air in front of me. Stevie takes it into the palm of her hand, like it's a snowflake and not a very dangerous piece of me.

"It was my decision, Dara," she says finally, looking right into my eyes.

She doesn't have to say any more, because I understand. That's one thing that hasn't changed. For all our fighting, Stevie understands me on a level that the others don't. And I like to think the same; that I know her differently.

"I just wish I had gotten a say in it, that's all."

"Anyway, can we move onto the next thing on the agenda?"

"There's an agenda?"

"Yes."

"Oh. I hope it's not all about me?"

It's supposed to come out as a joke, but it doesn't. The guilty feeling in my stomach swells, sour and hot with embarrassment that I've said too much.

Stevie gives me a nudge. "Don't be so big headed." In the look she gives me, she tells me we're okay, and

I try to believe her.

I feel my cheeks warm up as she pulls me up onto the bed with her and Chia.

“Okay,” I say, swallowing the frog in my throat. “What’s the next thing on this agenda then?”

Merry wheels her gaming chair backwards to reveal a black cat curled up on her lap. I can’t tell if it’s bad signal or something, but the cat looks kind of weird. Different to any other cat I’ve seen before, not that I’ve seen loads up close – we’ve always been a dog household because I think Mum’s a bit allergic. There’s a few on our street that I’m friendly with, like Uno, the black and white cat with one ear, and Enrique who is all thick black fur and likes to lie out on the garden walls in the sun.

There’s something off about it. Its fur looks a little strange. Too thick, with a purple-green sheen that reminds me of the patches of oil stains in my Pops’ workshop. Its eyes are bright pumpkin orange. And I know Merry is pretty slight so it could just be perspective, but it looks way too big to be just a cat.

The creature raises its little head, and says, “That would be me.”